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BETTER THINGS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL ATHLETICS

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By vote of the Board of School Commissioners of the city of Indianapolis, all participation in interscholastic athletics, with the exception of the state track meet, was forbidden the high schools of the city after the close of the football season of 1907. This action was taken with the understanding that a system of intraschool athletics should be substituted, and was really the outcome of the gradual growth of a very strong sentiment among some of the teachers of the two high schools, who had had most to do with managing athletics, that the then existing condition in athletics, which was similar to that in most high schools of the country, was not worthy of continuance.

There was no revolution in the athletic situation. There was rather a gradual evolution. For several years prior to the change, eligibility requirements had been increased and more strictly enforced and athletics had gradually come to be viewed in more nearly correct perspective and estimated by saner standards.

It was thus possible for our school board to issue the order already referred to, and possible for the faculties of the high schools to bring about the change with a minimum of friction. Not that there was no opposition to the new order of things. That was to be expected. The boys who had been brought up under the old standards found it hard to believe that any good could come of a change which deprived them of the excitement and glory of "licking" this or that institution in football or baseball. It must even be admitted that some teachers were skeptical concerning the new methods in athletics, and unfriendly to them.

Soon after the new order went into effect, the author of the present article read a paper before the Indiana State Teachers' Association, in which many reasons for the change were given.

This paper was in reality an explanation and a defense of the new system, and at that time a defense was needed, as many of the teachers of the state were so thoroughly impregnated with the infection of the old type of athletics that they were either hostile to the new scheme, or skeptical as to the possibility of its success. As the paper in question will, perhaps, explain the situation at the time of the change, better than one written at the present time could do, I will include it in this article. It is as follows:

Mr. President, and Fellow-Teachers of Indiana:

I have been asked to speak to you about the abolition of interscholastic contests in the Indianapolis schools. I have long been interested in the matter of improving existing conditions in athletics and welcomed the action of our school board in prohibiting interschool games in the future. As a boy I grew up in a locality where I got all the healthful exercise I needed without much help from athletics, as we use the term to denote certain forms of competitive games. I happened to live near the salt water and so had endless opportunities for rowing and sailing, boat-building, fishing and shooting, swimming and skating. Then to the north of my home was a forest of pine and cedar reaching to Plymouth, Massachusetts, a distance of nearly forty miles. Although the first part of New England to be settled, this section still contains one of the largest tracts of wooded country, in a single piece, on the Atlantic coast from Maine to Mexico. Wild deer still roam in these woods and many smaller forms of game are to be found. So I had plenty of healthy exercise, such as tramping, hunting, and camping in the woods, when tired of the salt water sports. Such opportunities are not present to such a degree in large inland cities, and I realize that in most cases the boys must work off their surplus energies in other ways.

Athletic games afford a substitute, and, when properly viewed and used, a worthy substitute, for field and water sports. I do not take the ground that football, baseball, etc., are essentially harmful or dangerous. Aside from the danger of overstrain, I think that football is no more dangerous than boating, shooting, swimming, or skating, and I would certainly advise every boy to do all of these things if possible in spite of the risk in them all.

I was never heavy enough to make a football team, but I remember playing one game at college which taught me much about the risks of the game. It was during the Thanksgiving recess and the boys who lived too far away to go home planned a game between upper classmen and underclassmen. For lack of any better material I was put in at right tackle for the upper classmen. It happened that the "varsity" back field that year were mainly under classmen and also men who lived at a distance, so I got a chance to see how they did things. Picking me as the easiest point in our line, the opposing quarterback ran play after play at me. I soon learned how to dive

in, grab all the legs I could conveniently reach, and thus pile up the interference on top of myself while our backs stopped the man with the ball. The interesting part is that I didn't get hurt any, although that same back field had played a very creditable game against Yale that season. I think that the friends of the game are right when they claim that its dangers have been overrated.

What I am principally opposed to is the false estimate now placed upon athletic sports and the failure of such sports to reach any large part of the boys. I would like to outline briefly to you some of the ways in which athletics, as at present almost universally conducted, fail in these respects, and, to set the matter before you in an orderly fashion, I will follow a little brief which I have prepared.

I will consider the defects of the present system from three viewpoints: first, from the pedagogical; second, from the physical; third, from an ethical point of view.

Under the first head, the pedagogical view, it may be said, I think, that the value of athletics as at present in vogue is disproportionate to the cost in time of players and of teachers who supervise the game. The school work of the player himself suffers because of the amount of time and energy spent on the field. Such an amount would hardly be spent for exercise if it were not regarded as very necessary to win. As to the time required of the teacher in charge, many of you can testify that it has at times been a severe burden, and that your larger work has suffered because of the extra demand upon you. Some of you can doubtless testify also that the financial management of football and other teams is no light burden. Moreover, aside from the effects upon those teachers and pupils directly connected with the games, the tension developed among the students in general, before a decisive game, results in inefficiency in studies. It is needless to dwell upon this point before a body of teachers.

From the physical side, it may be advanced that, owing to careless habits of training, many high-school boys do not properly prepare themselves for some of the more strenuous forms of athletic games, and overstrain may result. With athletics under control of a strictly capable man, preferably one who is a graduate physician, such results might be largely eliminated, but, as at present conducted, I suspect that more boys are overstrained than is generally known.

A second and more serious objection to present-day methods is that far too few of the boys are engaged in sports and games, while a small number of boys of a type who least need encouragement to exercise their bodies get an excessive share of such exercise. This is really the most valid argument, in my opinion, against the athletics of the day. Too few take part. The few who do, devote too much time and energy to it.

Now for a brief account of the actual working of the new scheme. As my experience has been confined to the Shortridge High School, I shall report only facts observed in connection with the athletics of that school. In the main, however, I should say that the benefits described would apply to both our high schools.

Our first new athletic work began January 1, 1908. A fencing-class of about thirty boys was organized by one of our men teachers. More boys applied than could well be handled. This class continued for three months and closed its season April 1. While a number of boys dropped out, as was to be expected where hard physical exercise and close attention to form was so necessary, a very respectable squad continued the work, and a tournament, with preliminaries, second round, semi-finals, consolations, and a final bout, lent all the excitement and interest to the course that was healthy. The final bout was held on the platform of the auditorium before the entire school, some 1,200 pupils being present. This bout was preceded by a drill of the entire squad without command, and very great interest was manifested by the pupils in the whole affair. Yet there were none of the bad effects which used to attach to interscholastic contests. The discipline and scholarship of the school, as a whole, did not suffer, and the scholarship of those who took part was not harmed by the two afternoons a week devoted to the sport.

Soon after the fencing work began, indoor track work and indoor tennis were started, each under the charge of a faculty man competent in those sports. Two very interesting indoor track meets have already been held, with the keenest sort of interest and competition on the part of those entered in the events. Over forty boys have had the benefits of the two afternoons a week of track practice, and some thirty boys and girls have been engaged in tennis. In addition to these, somewhat over eighty boys are now engaged in baseball practice twice a week, in four squads, under the management of four of our faculty men. A regular schedule of games has been arranged, and the baseball will be conducted after the manner of a four-team league. The division into squads was accomplished in the following manner, in order to prevent

the continuance of rivalry over to another year. Each manager chose a boy known to be a crack ball-player to act as his captain. Then, at a mass meeting of the seventy or more boys who wished to play, the captains drew lots for number of choice, and each in turn chose one boy until all were chosen. Each squad then chose a color by which it will be known for the season. In this way there can be no interclass bitterness, and, in addition, the teams will be much more evenly matched, and no team of young and small boys will be compelled to meet a team of older and larger boys. The baseball schedule is so arranged as not to conflict with the state track meet, which we still enter. In fact, there will be a recess of a couple of weeks in the baseball season, so that boys who happen to be on both baseball and track teams need not find their athletic work excessive or conflicting.

The continuance of the schools in interscholastic track work was permitted in recognition of the fact that in track work many of the evils which belong to football and to some other games are absent. There is no bodily contact of contestants, and that of itself makes track work less subject to what is called in football, "dirty play."

We have not yet worked out our method of handling football in intraschool athletics. Perhaps we shall find that we can get along without it.

We have, I think, shown that with a fair amount of intelligent co-operation on the part of faculty and students, many more boys can have the benefits of athletic games than under the old system, and fewer boys derive harm from athletics. We had, on April 1, over one hundred and forty boys actively engaged in athletics of some sort, whereas during the entire last year only fifty-one boys were certified as eligible, and not all those played in games. In discharging one of my duties in connection with athletics, namely, the recording of report cards of the boys who wish to become eligible—for we still require fifteen hours per week of passing grades before a boy can take part in athletics—I find a great improvement in the average scholarship of the athlete under the new system. A number of the boys have remarked, in handing me a report card, "That's the best report I ever got." So thoroughly

is the new scheme succeeding that many of the boys who at first opposed it have frankly admitted that they were mistaken, and these boys are now warm believers in it. If the proper amount of energy is given to the work, it will not be long before the pupils will regard it as a "time-honored institution" of our school system and will be its staunch defenders.

It seems to me that this new order of things is sufficiently worth while to merit wider experiment on the part of school authorities; and it is in the hope that this article may stimulate such experiment that I have reported the preliminary progress that we, in Indianapolis, believe we have made toward better things in secondary school athletics.

It may be interesting right here to give a few facts in regard to the number of boys who took part in athletics at Shortridge last year (1907). I happened to have charge of certifying to the eligibility of all players, both for interscholastic and interclass games, and kept a card-catalogue record of the matter. In all four branches of recognized athletic sports, football, basket-ball, baseball and track, fifty-one boys were certified to the principals of various schools. Not all those boys played in the games. That fifty-one includes all who went along as substitutes. We had, at Shortridge, during the year, about 500 boys. At the Manual Training High School they have many more boys than we have, but I doubt very much if any larger percentage actually took part in games.

As to the number of our boys who went out for practice but were never certified, they were not numerous. After the first team is picked, there is usually difficulty in keeping more than a full second team out at practice. The time of coach and captain is used to perfect a winning first team, and scant attention awaits any boy who has no prospects of making a star player. To give these other boys their share in the real benefits of athletic sports and games, we must first of all change our estimate of the absolute necessity of a winning first team. The instinct and desire to win is all right, but I think victory is obtained at too great cost when a large proportion of the boys are deprived of the benefits of the games conducted by the school, in order that the first team may win games.

To show you that under a system of intraschool games a much larger number of boys could derive benefits, I will cite the case of our interclass track meet held last spring (1907). There was plenty of interest, a keen desire to win was manifested, and more boys were certified for that meet than for all forms of interscholastic sport for the entire year. Yet there was very little disturbance of the regular school work in consequence, and

the conduct of the whole affair was entirely under our supervision and control.

This leads me to my third head—the ethical view of present-day athletics.

Where such things are not directly under the control of the school authorities, many evils creep in which could not do so were athletics confined to the boys of one school. Among them I may mention the spirit of warfare which attends too many of our sports. They have become contests rather than games. Bad feeling is too often evident, and, occasionally, where large numbers are concerned, the mob spirit is shown and boys do things which, under ordinary circumstances, they would not think of doing. At such times, too, the low type of rooter who always follows the games gets in his work, and the schools get a credit for rowdyism which they do not really deserve.

Apart from this directly bad side is another side as bad from the ethical point of view. Public and pupils estimate the value of educational institutions on the basis of athletic games won or lost. This is ridiculous, but it is so. The colleges all know it, and faculties wink at abuses in order to curry popular favor that their numbers may not diminish.

Another ethical evil is the hero worship accorded the successful athlete. He is lauded above his real merits, and the worthy student who is not an athlete, but who may some day be a far more useful member of the community, gets scant attention. This is perhaps all the better for the student, but I think you can all point to cases where the athlete has suffered from over-prominence.

It will not be necessary to go more into detail before an audience composed of teachers who have been studying these matters. I feel that you will all agree that there are many evils attendant upon our present athletics.

Now just a word of constructive criticism after all this destructive work. How can we improve upon the present situation, and, while lessening the intensity, increase the extent of our athletics, so that more boys may be benefited and fewer boys injured by them?

I believe that where the number of boys in a school is several hundred or more, the plan now being undertaken in this city will furnish a solution for our difficulties. As I noted a few minutes ago, more boys came out for our interclass track meet last spring than for all other forms of sport together. Let us put as much time and effort into stimulating participation in such intraschool athletics as we now put upon managing interscholastic games, and I am sure far more boys would receive benefit and fewer would be harmed. This sort of athletics will not run itself, however. It must be under competent management and supervision. It properly calls for the services of a director of the gymnasium and of the outdoor sports and games played in connection with the school. He should be a graduate physician, if possible, and he should also be an athlete in the best sense. He should be a man capable of beating any boy in the school at any sport

or game, and he should have broad and sound ethical sense. Such a man could solve most of the serious problems of present-day athletics. You say he would cost as much as a regular teacher? Yes! he should receive more than the average teacher. But why should the citizens of any prosperous community object to having their own sons, and daughters, too, receive the benefits of thorough and systematic physical training and also the beneficial relaxation of athletic games? Such a director could more than save his salary to any community by saving its boys from "going to the dogs."

You have seen many a promising boy spoiled under our present system by getting a wrong idea as to what is really worth while. Let us begin a campaign of education in regard to this matter. If enough of us are really interested in bettering the situation we shall better it in time.

Meanwhile, what can we do to help things out while our citizens are getting ready to attend to the matter through their school boards?

I would suggest, first, that where numbers permit, interscholastic games cease and that all the faculty work to encourage intraschool athletics. Let any man who can fence or box, or play baseball or basketball, get together a squad of boys in his specialty, and, at regular times, but not too frequently, put them through some lively work. As an incentive, let the season close with a game or series of several games between class teams or between the two upper classes and the two lower ones. There will be all the competition that is good for the school shown in such games.

At first there may be opposition to the new order of things. That is to be expected. The boys are infected with the spirit of contest and the thirst for winning teams. But if the matter is put to them firmly and fairly the opposition of the boys will not last long, particularly if opportunity for sport is given to the large numbers of boys who got no chance under the old system.

Where numbers are too small to keep up interest within the school, much can be done to better the present situation by restricting the outside games to a reasonable number, played with schools of similar size and at not too great distance, and by continuing, both in letter and in spirit, to live up to the excellent eligibility rules of our state High School Athletic Association.

NOTE.—Since the above article was accepted for publication two athletic seasons have passed, the spring and the fall seasons of 1908. To show that the methods described have continued to prove successful I will add a brief statement of the numbers taking part in baseball and in "soccer" or association football.

When the call for candidates for baseball was issued in April, eighty-one boys responded. A four-team league was formed, each team being under the direction of a faculty manager, and a regular schedule was planned. Games were played on two days a week, all four teams playing

at the same time on two different diamonds at the same field. The schedule was carried out successfully with some very good ball playing on the part of the boys and the games were eagerly contested and in most cases close. At the close of the series a game was played between a picked nine from the two teams at the foot of the list, and a picked nine from the faculty, the boys winning by a score of 9-6.

There is every evidence that a repetition of this success in baseball is possible.

In the fall term, as the above article suggests, we found it unnecessary to play the ordinary kind of football, but introduced instead the association game, or soccer football, as it is sometimes called. We did this because we believed that more boys would play this game for the sake of the game itself than would play regular football for that reason. I think events proved the correctness of the assumption. At the call for candidates ninety-six boys were chosen and a four-team league organized under four faculty managers as in baseball. The boys were assigned to teams purely by choice of the four captains, each choosing one boy in turn until all were taken. The schedule has been successfully completed with much interest on the part of the boys engaged in the sport and very few injuries have resulted. At least fifty boys stayed at the game, which speaks for the interest the players took in it.

There was less interest in the game on the part of those not playing, than in regular football, which, I think, merely reflects the prevailing condition of mind in America regarding athletic contests. We hope to educate the non-athletic portion of the school until they either become reasonably athletic themselves or at least learn to take a wholesome and moderate interest in games and sports which are not purely gladiatorial in their tendencies.